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In the Bedroom

Abstract

This is a review of *In the Bedroom* (2001).

Author Notes

Brad Stetson is author of *Living Victims, Stolen Lives: Parents of Murdered Children Speak to America* (Baywood, 2002).

Based on an 18 page short story by the late Andre Dubus, *In the Bedroom* (director Todd Field's feature debut) carefully tells the story of Matt and Ruth Fowler (Tom Wilkinson and Sissy Spacek), a well-to do New England doctor and High School choral director whose son Frank (Nick Stahl) is home for a lazy summer, before pursuing his architecture career. The adoration of the Fowlers for their golden son is deeply touching, and ultimately the basic source of the film's emotional power. Frank's pursuit of the coy, attractive townie Natalie (Marisa Tomei), is dismissed by his indulgent father as a summer fling. But the observant and suspicious Ruth sees trouble in the offing, as her son's affair with Natalie - an anxious mother of two young children who is separated from her abusive and jealous husband - intensifies through the summer.

The emotional pulse of this film throbs louder and quicker with each passing scene, climaxing in a moment of sudden horror so authentic that it elicited loud gasps from the audience during my viewing. The nuanced combination of sexual energy, tender affection, familial hostility, overwhelming grief and primal bloodlust that Todd Field and this ensemble of actors - particularly Spacek and Wilkinson - display is true enough to be something of a snapshot of human nature in these various postures.

It is, however, in its unfolding of grief that this picture rises to its highest level. Following Frank's murder at the hands of Natalie's scorned and seething

husband, a young man who is the scion of the town's wealthy fish processor, the interaction between Matt and Ruth as parents in deep mourning is profound. As they both stumble through their lives in shock, depression and confusion, they exemplify the psycho-emotional trauma experienced by parents of murdered children. Through their inexpressible rage and sense of violation, their frustration at the legal system, their feelings of powerlessness, the awkward conversations with friends, their occasional chance encounters about town with their son's murderer, and their unbearable marital strain, the Fowlers give us what amounts to a realistic tour of the inner life of parents enduring murdered - child grief. We get a taste of their epic loss and irremediable pain through the scenes revealing their silent suffering: Ruth's despairing visit to her son's grave, Matt's trembling caress of his precious son's pillow, Matt's flashbacks to his son's idyllic boyhood, Ruth's vacant stares at the flickering television, late into every night.

It is rare indeed in American cinema to find so honest a grappling with murder, and what it leaves behind. While some films have dealt with similar themes of loss (*Terms of Endearment*, 1983; *The Stone Boy*, 1985; *Boyz in the Hood*, 1995), *In the Bedroom* moves unusually deep into the emotional waters of intense bereavement. Missing from the film though is the religious dimension that often defines the human experience of profound loss. While overt reflection on the problem of evil or an exercise in theodicy may be an unrealistic expectation from

any major film given our culture of secular cinema, still the basic, natural questioning of God's omnipotence, fairness and beneficence is unheard. While certainly the emotional realism of this film makes it possible for viewers to imagine an inward conversation between the characters and the divine along these lines, its absence from the narrative is a false note, and leaves us wondering why such thoughtful, sensitive people like Matt and Ruth are not searching for a divine response to their devastated lives and the injustice perpetrated against them and their son.

Importantly, the Fowler's frustration over their son's murder and its ultimate vigilante expression raises questions about the nature of justice and punishment that have far-reaching social and personal implications. These questions of social ethics track with the transcendent questions of divine ethics the film raises, and promise it will be a stimulating tool for classroom discussion as well as a dramatic illustration of the ambiguities of human relationships and reactions to tragic circumstances.